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LETHAL LESSON

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

PROLOGUE

“GET OUT.” THE DRIVER’S VOICE was compacted with rage. The car was stopped in the middle of the road. Only the fan of light provided by the headlights made any inroads in the utter darkness. Any trace of that night’s half moon was obliterated by the swirling snow. At near midnight, in these conditions, it was unlikely any traffic would be on the road.

“What?” The man was drunk. He couldn’t make out what was being said to him.

“Get out!” Shouting now, the driver leaned over, opened the door, and pushed hard at the man. Unable to help himself, the drunk man tumbled out onto the bank of snow that had piled up on the side of the road. He watched the car disappear around the corner toward Castlegar, the last red shred of its tail lights vanishing behind the bend. He stood, bemused, and then turned and began to trudge back to town. In an unconscious imitation of driving, the man stumbled across the road to walk on the right-hand side.

The river roared below him in the blackness. He shook his head as if to clear it, but the driving snow that blew onto his face under his hat countered his efforts to understand what was happening. He wondered suddenly where his car was. He tried pulling his hat off to see better, but that only covered him in snow and didn't alleviate the darkness. It occurred to him that he'd left something at home, and he tried to remember what it was. Not the car. How would he have gotten this far without the car? In the same instant he remembered, the road was lit blindingly by the headlights of a car coming from behind him, heading toward Nelson. His spirit buoyed in this one illuminated moment, and everything made sense. He would get home, be welcomed. He put out an arm to stop the car. He wanted to turn to face it, but he felt dizzy. The engine revved, sudden and deafening; he could hear it behind him and frowned. The sensation of being thrown into the snowy air made him feel full of light, as if the angels had come. In the darkness of the next moment, he was not aware of landing. He did not hear the blunt, hard sound of breaking, nor the muffled scream from somewhere. He had no sensation of bouncing or rolling. He knew nothing of sliding like a broken doll and resting in the snow far below. He did not hear the roar of the car disappearing, or see the lights blink out. He, indeed, would never hear or see anything again.

CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, December 3, 1947

WENDY KEELING WAS AS HAPPY as she could ever remember being in her mostly unhappy life. She had ushered the children outside after they had put their lunch things away, and she could hear them now, shrieking in the snow, releasing all that pent-up animal energy they had accumulated during the morning. She would try to get them all on to arithmetic in the afternoon. She would start with a puzzle they could tackle in pairs. She walked up and down the short rows to make sure all the crumbs and jam smudges were off the desks, checked inside to make sure no one had hidden a sandwich away, and then looked at the clock. They had five minutes still before they had to come in and remove their piles of now no doubt soaking outer clothes.

Taking up a piece of chalk, she drew six glasses on the board and indicated with a line that the first three were filled. Then she went outside holding the school bell and rang it, calling, "It's time, ladies and gentlemen!"

Under the cries of protest, she stood on the porch, her arms crossed in front of her, looking benignly implacable and saying nothing. Even after only a few days, they knew the routine. Line up in front of the stairs and be allowed in quickly. The door was kept closed to keep the heat in until they were all ready to come in at once.

“What are we doing this afternoon, miss?” asked Rafe, one of Angela Bertolli’s boys, turning to give a little shove to someone trying to usurp his first-place spot in line.

“Rafe!” Miss Keeling gave a warning note, and then smiled. “It’s a great afternoon for arithmetic. Okay, everyone present and correct?” Seeing that the jostling group contained the number of students she expected, thirteen, Miss Keeling swung open the door, and watched the muffled group clamber up the stairs and into the classroom. She turned and put her head in the door. “Coats and scarves up! In your desks by the time I turn around.”

She looked again at the now-quiet yard, with its trampled snow and two nascent snowmen, and was about to come in when she saw a red knitted scarf hanging on a branch of a short spruce tree at the south side of the school. Edith. Her granny had knitted it for her, Edith had told her. She was about to call the girl to come and take responsibility for her scarf, when she thought better of disrupting the complications of removing outer clothes and rubber boots. She closed the door and went down the four stairs and stepped into the snow, wishing immediately she had her rubbers, and made for the scarf.

When she saw the black car, parked halfway down the hill, the clouds of white coming out of the exhaust, she

frowned. The car was not moving, but the engine was running. Sunlight reflected off the front windshield, showing only the snow and trees around it, making it seem, she thought whimsically, as if she could see into its mind. Who was in it? It was almost as if someone were watching her, or the school, or more worryingly, the students. But who? She didn't recognize the car. She was going to wave, but then thought, Someone has come up the wrong road and is even now looking at a map. If that person was lost, she'd not be much use to them. She'd only come to the area a short time ago herself.

Even with the door closed, she could hear the banging and laughing of the children in the little kitchen room, boots being pulled off and hurled under the coat-rack bench, and she turned back to retrieve the scarf. When she looked down the road again, she saw that the car was slowly beginning to back away. Then, in some trick of the light, the windshield stopped reflecting the peaceful world it looked out on, and she could see, for the briefest moment, the shape of the head inside turned away to look out the back window, right arm over the seat, gloved left hand on the steering wheel, as the driver backed the car nonchalantly down the hill.

She lurched up the steps, not daring to look again, some atavistic superstition urging her to ignore what she had seen. It was a bad reflection, it was nothing, a lost stranger now pulling silently back to the main road. Do not look, it seemed to be saying, because looking will make it real. But competing with that desperate hope was the cold hard nub of the truth, deep in her gut. It had been too good to be true. Somehow, they had found her.

CHAPTER TWO

Friday, December 5

ROSE SCOTT LOOKED AROUND HER cramped bedroom. Even with the sun reflecting off the snow outside, the tiny bedroom window looked out only on the dark woods that pressed against the back of the cottage. She folded her Sunday dress carefully, preparing to put it into the suitcase that lay open on the bed, and then stood up to stretch out her back.

She felt vaguely bad about lying, but no one would care. She'd be away from here and everyone would think she'd gone off to a fairy-tale ending. At the moment, "happily ever after" meant anywhere but here—anywhere he wasn't. Even knowing she'd be safely away, the thought of him released a flood of sickening anxiety. She jumped at the sound of the telephone, its ring shattering the silence of the cottage. Should she tell Wendy about him?

She picked up the instrument that was on the desk in the tiny sitting room. "B 228, Rose Scott speaking." She could

feel her heart beating in her throat.

“Oh, hello! I was looking for Wendy, Wendy Keeling. Is this her number?” A pleasant, friendly female voice.

“Yes, that’s right. She’s not here just now. She teaches at the school. She should be home by five or so. Can I give her a message?” Relief washed through her. For Wendy.

The woman on the other end of the line hesitated. “I’m her oldest friend, and I’ve just come up and thought I could surprise her. Would it be a bother if I stopped by this evening after she comes home?”

“No, of course not. Do you know how to get here?”

“I’m coming from Nelson,” the woman said.

“Right, well you’ll drive about twenty-five miles and just before the road takes a sharp rise, you’ll see three little drives that go toward the lake, on your right. We’re the middle one.”

Rose put the receiver back on the cradle and leaned against the desk and shook her head, uttering a mirthless laugh. Wendy. Young, much younger than her, attractive. Could she become a target? But at least she had friends, evidently, and maybe that would protect her. She returned to the bedroom to continue her packing and then hesitated. Should she have asked the caller her name? She shook her head. By tomorrow, none of it would matter. At that moment, Rose could not think that she had a single friend in the world.



Monday, December 8

ELEANOR ARMSTRONG, THE King’s Cove postmistress, slid the noisy wooden kiosk window up at Lane’s knock and

propped it with a stick. “Good Monday morning, my dear. Nothing in today, I’m afraid. The weather seems to have kept the boat docked up in town. Poor Kenny managed to drive all the way down to the wharf through the snow and had to come all the way back empty-handed. Did the inspector get off all right?” Lane thought of Eleanor and Kenny Armstrong practically as replacements for her grandparents, who were far away in Scotland. The Armstrongs ran the tiny King’s Cove post office, and she basked in their good nature and enduring affection.

“Yes, he put the chains on yesterday afternoon. I’ve told him on no account to come home tonight if this continues.” Lane hadn’t liked telling her new husband to stay at his little house in Nelson, but one had to be sensible. In a way she’d never imagined possible before her wedding, she’d become quite used to having him at home at night. She’d been fearful that she’d miss her solitude once she married. Not a bit of it. She had all day to be solitary when he was off in town police inspecting.

That morning she had watched him back out of the gate, turn deftly in the thick, new fall of snow, and drive off, his chains clanking softly on the blanketed road. She had tidied the kitchen, and then had stood looking out her French doors at the lake below, shrouded, like everything this morning, in whiteness and mist. Nothing had moved along the water. She had wondered if it ever iced up the way the rivers of her childhood had. Lane had grown up as part of a British community alternately in Riga, Latvia, and the seaside resort of Bilderlingshof, and she had adored the winters of her childhood. Snow always lifted her spirits.

She'd heard Kenny's truck struggling along the road on the way back from the wharf, where he normally met the steamboat four times a week to pick up the mail. She'd shovelled her way along the path between her house and the post office, and then propped her shovel against a tree and walked the rest of the way in the track left by Kenny's bright red Ford.

The truck provided the only splash of colour at the moment, with the clouds grey and low, and snow piled over everything, obscuring all but some glimpses of the dark green of the surrounding pine forest. The little wooden room that made up the post office was attached to the Armstrong cottage, and at the moment, though out of the immediate elements, it felt like a deep-freeze.

Eleanor grinned at Lane and cocked her head toward the inside of the cottage just past where she stored all the business of the post office. "Come on. Come have a cup of tea. I doubt anyone will attempt the trip this morning. The wireless has promised no let-up in the snow. I'm just making some Christmas cake."

Lane banged the snow off her boots on the stair and, stepping inside, leaned down to unlace them. She immediately had a face full of Alexandra, the Armstrongs' young West Highland dog, who wriggled excitedly and licked Lane's ear.

"Hello, darling! What do you do in all this snow, eh?" She toed her boots off and picked up the dog, who continued the face-licking campaign. "Gosh, it does smell lovely in here!"

"I haven't started baking yet. I'm on the last stages of

mixing. I bet it's the fruit soaking in brandy that you smell. His nibs is just bringing in some wood."

Lane pulled off her wool tartan jacket and sat in her usual chair, wondering if there was anything more divine than the smell of brandy-soaked raisins in a snug and cheerful cottage on a winter's day. "Maybe I should attempt it?" she said.

"Nonsense. I'm making enough to feed an army. It's shocking that I left it so late. I usually have them soaking away in the pantry by the end of October. It's already gone December 8. I can't think what it will taste like. I don't know what came over me this year. All the excitement of your wedding, I expect. Have you thought of trying to make shortbread?"

"You're so kind not to point out my ghastly deficiencies in the kitchen. Could I manage shortbread, do you think?"

"Certainly, my dear. You just have to remember not to handle it too much. Did you find Lady Armstrong's cookery books in the attic? It'll be in one of those."

Lady Armstrong, who had lived in the house Lane now owned, was Kenny's deceased mother, and it was generally assumed in King's Cove that she still haunted the place. Lane had reason to be relieved that the ghostly Lady Armstrong had the sense not to do her usual trick of opening the attic windows during this bitter cold spell.

"I found one of them. I've been using it to learn the basics. Honestly, I don't think my father ever imagined a world without a cook. My sister and I were brought up to be absolutely useless in the kitchen. It's quite quaint to be sorting out what is meant by a 'gill.' I've just interpreted

it as ‘some,’ and hoped that after I’ve added ‘some’ milk to something it ends up the right consistency.”

Alexandra jumped off her bed of folded quilt and gave a welcoming bark at the sound of Kenny on the steps.

“I thought I saw you plowing through the snow like a Laplander. What a day!” Kenny dumped the load of split wood into the woodbox, said a few words to Alexandra, and took off his scarf and thick woollen sweater. “I hope the lines don’t go down.”

As if to prove the system was so far withstanding this heavy onslaught of winter, the Armstrongs’ phone rang. Lane was stirring sugar into her tea, thinking of the shortbread biscuits made by her parents’ Latvian cook, who had learned to make them to please her English employer when Lane was a child, after her mother had died. They had always made her think of hardtack, or some other impenetrable military biscuit. It was a revelation when she first met real shortbread in England during her Christmas breaks from Oxford.

She came to with a start. It was two longs and a short, her ring pattern on their party line telephone system. “Oh. I think that’s mine. Do you mind?”

Kenny waved her through to the sitting room where the instrument sat in splendour on a doily on a side table. The little-used room was about twenty degrees colder than the kitchen.

“KC 431, Lane Winslow speaking.”

“Horrors! Can you believe this? I’ve been here for five winters and I still can’t get over it. This is the worst by far!”

“Hello, Angela. Did you get the children off to school?”

Oh, I can hear you haven't." Angela's three boys all seemed to be shouting at once in the background.

"I tried. Once you get onto the main road it's not quite as bad as long as you have chains. I struggled up the hill to the school and the place was as dark and cold as a grave. I had to bring them all back. On the way down I met Mrs. Laurie from that cottage near the lake and told her not to bother. We both agreed that it was funny that we hadn't been telephoned to say school was closed. Only about six or seven families send their kids there."

"I'm sure you secretly like having the boys around," Lane said, smiling. "Don't they have a new teacher?"

"Oh, yes. Have had for a little more than a week. Miss Scott is off to be married. She's well over thirty. It was about time we got someone younger, though I will say, the boys were terrified of Miss Scott. They never misbehaved with her. I wish I had some of what she has!"

"No, you don't. You don't believe any more than I do that children ought to be terrified into submission. Anyway, they learn, don't they?"

"Well, they can all read, if that's what you mean, and do a little arithmetic. And they do like the new teacher. She seems to be terribly kind."

"There you are, you see."

"I suppose they can learn anything else they need once they're up at the high school. But that's still a few years away. Oop, they're off!" Lane heard a crash and a wail in the background as Angela rang off in a hurry to deal with whatever emergency had arisen.

"The teacher at the Balfour school hasn't turned up

and didn't phone anyone, so Angela's got the boys all day. I know she'd been planning to paint today. From the background row, I don't get the feeling she'll get much done!" Lane sat down and looked gratefully at her cup, which was being refilled by Kenny. Eleanor was up at the counter with an enormous bowl and was stirring the contents with some difficulty.

"I met the new teacher," Kenny said, dropping a bit of toast on the floor for Alexandra. "Miss . . . Miss. Damn. Something to do with the navy. Keeling. That was it. I stopped by Bales's store on Friday to gas up the truck and pick up some things for her majesty here, and Miss Keeling was in there. She was sent out by the government right away, she told me, when Miss Scott announced her plan to marry. In fact, I think she's staying there. At Miss Scott's, I mean. Of course, it's a cottage for the local teacher, so it's not really Miss Scott's. She's not marrying anyone local, and there seems to be some sort of holdup in the wedding proceedings, so they both are staying there for the time being."

"You're a veritable fountain of knowledge. I only sent you to the store to pick up flour and treacle," Eleanor said. By this time, she'd given up trying to mix the fruit with a spoon and was up to her elbows, mixing with her bare hands. "Anyway, I'm happy to hear poor Miss Keeling isn't there on her own. It must have been very lonely for Miss Scott, all that time racketing about in a cottage by herself. Mind you, I don't know how Miss Keeling will be managing that mob of Angela's, and I hear a couple of the other families have rowdy children as well."

“Angela says her boys already like her because she’s kind, so they are not complete strangers to finer feelings,” Lane said, watching with a sense of deep contentment as Eleanor continued the mysterious process of creating Christmas cake. She was now sifting flour and spices onto a metal tray. Then Lane sat up, her brow furrowed. “I wonder if Angela has tried to phone Miss Scott’s place? What if there was some sort of trouble and one of them has had to rush the other to town?”

A quick call to Angela established that she hadn’t phoned the teacher’s cottage, and that Rafe had fallen and was having a bad scrape attended to, and would Lane mind telephoning for her? Lane put a call through to the exchange, which was situated at the back of Bales’s store on the Balfour hill. It was manned by Lucy Prevost, who was on duty and in good form.

“How can I connect you?” Lucy said with pert professionalism. And then, “Is that you, Miss Winslow?”

“Yes. How are you, Lucy? No trouble getting in to work today?”

“Oh, not me! I love a good slog through the snow! Who would you like to speak to?”

Lane could hear in Lucy’s voice that she was dying to ask about the honeymoon. Lucy was known to eavesdrop on people’s conversations and had followed Lane Winslow almost from the moment she’d arrived, what with the murders and the thrilling romance with Inspector Darling of the Nelson Police. Lane had come to King’s Cove to get away from the violence of the war, after a career with the Special Operations Executive in intelligence in London,

and almost immediately had come to the notice of the local police when a body was found in her creek. Since then she had applied her considerable skill and knowledge to helping the police with several other murders.

“Please put me through to Miss Scott or Miss Keeling, the teachers,” Lane said firmly, not about to indulge the telephonist’s worst instincts.

“One moment, please.”

After a lengthy pause in which there was absolute silence, Lucy was back on. “Nope. The line is still dead. I’m not surprised, mind you, in this snow.”

“What do you mean, ‘still dead’? How long has it been down?”

“I don’t know. Maybe since Saturday? I know it worked Friday.”

Lane rang off and stood thoughtfully for a moment before going back into the bustle and warmth of the Armstrongs’ little kitchen. “You know, I wonder if I hadn’t better go along and make sure everyone is all right. The phone line seems to be knocked down, and I don’t like it that Miss Keeling didn’t turn up at the school. I don’t know where she’s from, and she may not be used to these conditions. She could have run her car into a snowbank or something.”

“Should I come with?” offered Kenny.

“No, no. If something is amiss, I can contact people from the store telephone. No point in two of us floundering about in this stuff.”

The trip out onto the main road to Nelson was eased somewhat by the fact that both Darling and Kenny Armstrong had left tracks for Lane’s little car to travel

in, and the main road had become densely packed and quite negotiable with chains. She didn't encounter any real difficulty until she reached the drive down the hill, past Bales's store, to the teacher's cottage, which was a good two hundred yards from the lakeshore on a slight rise. It was clear no one had been on it since this last heavy fall of snow the night before.

She drove slowly down the narrow drive, and as she rounded a small stand of trees, the green cottage came into view. The cottage had an air of having been abandoned, its green paint incongruously cheerful in the almost arctic landscape around it. No smoke from the chimney, no lights, no sign of traffic up and down the steps. It took her a moment to register that there was no car parked next to the house, though there was evidence that one had been there at some prior time. Did Miss Keeling have a car, or did they share the one Miss Scott always drove? Regardless, there had clearly been no traffic to or from the cottage since at least the previous afternoon, if not longer. Undecided about her next move, Lane turned off the engine and sat in the sudden silence, looking at the front door. Why would both teachers go away and not let the parents know there would be no one at the school today? She should go knock, just in case.

The snow came up over the tops of her boots, and she could feel it settling down inside them. The soft pitted mounds of new snow on the porch indicated there'd been a good deal of coming and going on the porch before the snowfall. She knocked on the door, calling out, "Miss Scott? Miss Keeling?"

She looked around and down toward the lake. Neighbours were far enough away, across fields and stands of trees, that they were barely visible. They would certainly not hear if anyone were in distress. Almost as an afterthought, Lane turned the doorknob as she was about to go back down to her car. The door creaked open as if it had been expecting her. She knocked again, looking into the darkness through the crack she had opened.

“Hello? Miss Scott? Is anyone here?” Hearing nothing, she pushed the door open, and even in the murky light sifting through the closed curtains, she could see that things were very much amiss. Books had been thrown to the floor, a chair knocked on its side, and a small wooden table overturned, broken crockery on the floor where it had slipped off in the melee. It was at that moment that she heard a faint and agonized groan.